

SPEECH OF
JOHN HAY

AT THE UNVEILING OF
THE BUST OF

SIR WALTER SCOTT
IN WESTMINSTER ABBEY

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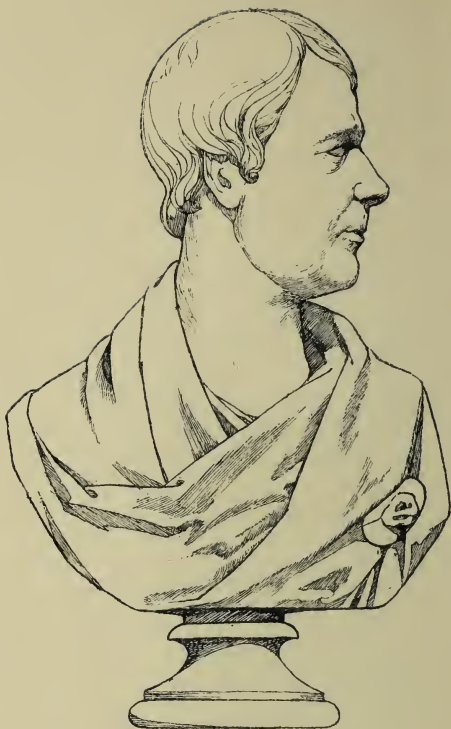
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SPEECH OF JOHN HAY

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MAY 21, 1897



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SPEECH OF JOHN HAY

A CLEVER French author made a book some years ago called the "Forty-First Arm-Chair." It consisted of brief biographies of the most famous writers of France, none of whom had been members of the Academy. The astonishment of a stranger who is told that neither Molière nor Balzac was ever embraced among the Forty Immortals, is very like that which has often affected the tourist who, searching among the illustrious names and faces which make this Abbey glorious, has asked in vain for the Author of Waverley. It is not that he has ever been forgotten or

neglected. His lines have gone out through all the earth and his words to the end of the world. No face in modern history, if we may except the magisterial profile of Napoleon, is so well known as the winning, irregular features dominated by the towering brow of the Squire of Abbotsford. It is rather the world-wide extent of his fame that has seemed hitherto to make it unnecessary that his visible image should be shrined here among England's worthies. His spirit is everywhere; he is revered wherever the English speech has travelled; and translations have given some glimpses of his brightness through the veil of many alien tongues. But the vastness of his name is no just reason why it may not have a local habitation also. It is therefore most fitting that his bust should be placed to-day, among those of his mighty

peers, in this great pántheon of immortal Englishmen.

In this most significant and interesting ceremony, I should have no excuse for appearing, except as representing for the time being a large section of Walter Scott's immense constituency. I doubt if anywhere his writings have had a more loving welcome than in America. The books a boy reads are those most ardently admired and longest remembered ; and America revelled in Scott when the country was young. I have heard from my father—a pioneer of Kentucky—that in the early days of this century men would saddle their horses and ride from all the neighbouring counties to the principal post-town of the region, when a new novel by the Author of *Waverley* was expected. All over our straggling States and Territories—in the

East, where a civilization of slender resources but boundless hopes was building, in the West, where the stern conflict was going on, of the pioneer subduing the continent—the books most read were those poems of magic and of sentiment, those tales of bygone chivalry and romance, which Walter Scott was pouring forth upon the world with a rich facility, a sort of joyous fecundity, like that of Nature in her most genial moods. He had no clique of readers, no illuminated sect of admirers, to bewilder criticism by excess of its own subtlety. In a community engaged in the strenuous struggle for empire, whose dreams, careless of the past, were turned, in the clear, hard light of a nation's morning, to a future of unlimited grandeur and power, there was none too sophisticated to appreciate, none too lowly to enjoy, those

marvellous pictures of a time gone for ever by, pleasing and stimulating to a starved fancy, in the softened light of memory and art, though the times themselves were unlamented by a people and an age whose faces were set towards a far different future. Through all these important formative days of the Republic, Scott was the favourite author of Americans; and while his writings may not be said to have had any special weight in our material and political development, yet their influence was enormous upon the taste and the sentiments of a people peculiarly sensitive to such influences, from the very circumstances of their environment. The romances of courts and castles were specially appreciated in the woods and prairies of the frontier, where a pure democracy reigned. The poems and novels of Scott,

saturated with the glamour of legend and tradition, were greedily devoured by a people without perspective, conscious that they themselves were ancestors of a redoubtable line, whose battle was with the passing hour, whose glories were all in the days to come.

Since the time of Scott we have seen many fashions in fiction come and go ; each generation naturally seeks a different expression of its experience and its ideals. But the author of *Waverley*, amid all the vicissitudes of changing modes, has kept his pre-eminence in two hemispheres, as the master of imaginative narration. Even those of us who make no pretensions to the critical faculty may see the twofold reason of this enduring masterhood. Both mentally and morally, Scott was one of the greatest writers that ever lived. His

mere memory, his power of acquiring and retaining serviceable facts, was almost inconceivable to ordinary men, and his constructive imagination was nothing short of prodigious. The lochs and hills of Scotland swarm with the engaging phantoms with which he has peopled them for all time ; the historical personages of past centuries are jostled in our memories by the characters he has created, more vivid in vitality and colour than the real soldiers and lovers with whom he has cast their lives. But probably the morality of Scott appeals more strongly to the many than even his enormous mental powers. His ideals are lofty and pure ; his heroes are brave and strong, not exempt from human infirmities, but always devoted to ends more or less noble. His heroines, whom he frankly asks you to admire, are beautiful and true. They walk in

womanly dignity through his pages, whether garbed as peasants or as princesses, with honest brows uplifted, with eyes gentle but fearless, pure in heart and delicate in speech. Valour, purity, and loyalty—these are the essential and undying elements of the charm with which this great magician has soothed and lulled the weariness of the world through three tormented generations. For this he has received the uncritical, ungrudging love of grateful millions.

His magic still has power to charm all wholesome and candid souls. Although so many years have passed since his great heart broke in the valiant struggle against evil fortune, his poems and his tales are read with undiminished interest and perennial pleasure. He loved, with a simple, straightforward affection, man and nature, his country and his

kind ; he has his reward in a fame for ever fresh and unhackneyed. The poet who, as an infant, clapped his hands and cried "Bonnie" to the thunderstorm, and whose dying senses were delighted by the farewell whisper of the Tweed rippling over its pebbles, is quoted in every changing aspect of sun and shadow that sweeps over the face of Scotland. The man who blew so clear a clarion of patriotism lives for ever in the speech of those who seek a line to describe the love of country. The robust, athletic spirit of his tales of old, the loyal quarrels, the instinctive loves, the staunch devotion of the uncomplicated creatures of his inexhaustible fancy—all these have their special message and attraction for the minds of our day, fatigued with problems, with doubts and futile questionings. His work is a clear, high voice from a simpler age than

ours, breathing a song of lofty and unclouded purpose, of sincere and powerful passion, to which the world, however weary and pre-occupied, must needs still listen and attend.

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